

# Out of uniform: building community resilience through non-traditional emergency volunteering

By David Bruce, Communications Manager Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

A familiar sight at the scene of a natural hazard emergency is the arrival of highly motivated individuals ready to assist in whatever way they can. There is nothing new in that. Our volunteer fire and emergency services organisations were founded in communities of local volunteers.

Over many decades, as the official emergency services agencies have become more professional, accredited and organised, the role of the unofficial and informal volunteer has sat uneasily with the official response.

A project in the new Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) will develop new approaches to deal with the reality of volunteering today. It is an integration of the formal and the informal volunteer into the full spectrum of incident prevention, preparation, response and recovery.

Project leader, Professor John Handmer of RMIT University, said that although this issue has been widespread for a long time, it has been the subject of little research.

‘We know that very large numbers of people quickly converge on incidents saying they want to help. And no one has really looked at this in a research sense in Australia or New Zealand. These people are willing and usually able to help but they don’t want to be a part of the formal response organisations.

‘There is a significant and largely untapped opportunity for emergency management agencies to contribute to building community resilience to natural hazards by supporting and engaging with non-traditional emergency volunteers—and volunteering organisations—in new ways,’ he said.

The traditional model of emergency volunteering employed in Australia and New Zealand is based on formal, accredited volunteers who are affiliated with state emergency management agencies and have been involved in response and recovery roles. While this form of volunteering is crucial and has many strengths, it excludes the potentially large number of people who are motivated to volunteer before, during and after emergencies in a less ongoing and formal way.

‘One thing that has changed in recent times is that spontaneous volunteering is now not necessarily place-specific. It used to be just about turning up at the incident site. But agencies are now dealing with networks of remote and mostly online volunteers harnessing resources and people to respond. Many of these people maybe nowhere near the actual incident site but they are having an impact on the response, often over an extended period. They could be organising people or donations, or connecting people with resources, for example’, Professor Handmer said.

Fellow RMIT University researcher Dr Joshua Whittaker notes that almost everyone in society has the potential to be a volunteer in a crisis.

‘In many cases the first people on the scene of an emergency or a disaster are the local volunteers. The initial response is often spontaneous at the local level by untrained people. Then later, the emergency services teams arrive and these initial efforts are often sidelined or stifled. At the other end of the incident, when the formal relief and recovery services have finished, the community is still there dealing with these problems, largely through its volunteers,’ he said.

The role of volunteers in increasing community resilience to disasters is recognised in both the priority actions of the UN Office of Disaster Risk Reduction’s *Hyogo Framework for Action* and the priority outcomes of the *Australian National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*.

‘It is pretty hard to implement these strategies if we are saying that everyone should just wait for the emergency agencies to turn up. It is actually about well-prepared and self-sufficient communities. And in a lot of communities that capacity already exists. That may be a group that forms with a specific intent like Blaze Aid, or it might be an existing sporting or community organisation that responds by drawing on its established resources and networks,’ said Dr Whittaker.

Given the growing exposure of people to natural hazards due to rapidly expanding settlements in rural, coastal and fringe areas over recent years, it is likely that non-traditional volunteers will provide the bulk of

the additional surge capacity needed to deal with the more frequent natural hazard events occurring under climate change. At the same time, there are more and more examples of government and non-government organisations, as well as motivated individuals and groups, finding new ways to harness the capacities of non-traditional emergency volunteers. However, these examples are isolated and have not yet been integrated into new and more inclusive models of volunteering for the emergency management sector. The development of new, co-ordinated models is needed to provide a framework for engaging further with this potential additional workforce.

Dr Whittaker acknowledges that this type of volunteering is not new. 'But what is new is the acknowledgement by the emergency services that these people are out there and they are doing good things. How can we best work with them?

'This is really an acknowledgement of the importance of these people right through from the 80-year-old sandwich maker, to the bloke with a shovel, the person who rushes to free people from the rubble, or the distant internet fund raiser,' he said.

This project will select case studies to illustrate both the benefits and the problems with non-traditional volunteering. Dr Whittaker explains: 'It's not always positive. Sometimes it can create problems for the emergency services agencies.

'One of the examples that is often discussed is the huge convergence of people on the scene of ground zero after 9/11. They had tens of thousands of people descend on New York City; locals but also people from all around America, all wanting to help. And that became a major logistical challenge for the emergency services organisations that had to manage this. It created real problems. Many people turned up wanting to help, but they didn't know how to help. They couldn't really help. The best thing they could do was not be there, but this created all sorts of tensions and problems from the agencies' points of view,' Dr Whittaker said.

Professor Handmer said the project will develop a model for agencies to better work with non-traditional volunteers. 'But that is a high-level goal. The benefits are not just for the agencies. It will benefit communities because they are the ones most affected. Community resilience is about involving communities in emergency management. It is about them taking responsibility for their risk, and preparing and responding in the best way and to ensure that when they are doing good things on the ground the formal system supports and facilitates the community.'

The project has three key objectives:

- To identify how non-traditional emergency volunteering contributes to building community resilience to disasters throughout different phases of emergency management.
- To identify ways the emergency management sector in Australia and New Zealand can promote community resilience through support of non-traditional emergency volunteering.
- To develop and evaluate alternative models for emergency volunteering in Australia and New Zealand that are inclusive of non-traditional volunteering and volunteering organisations.



Student Volunteer Army in Christchurch, September 2010.

A related project the CRC is focussing on is improving the retention and engagement of volunteers in emergency services agencies. The NSW State Emergency Service estimates that the attrition rate of active volunteers is around 20 per cent each year. High attrition rates create high operating costs (recruiting, training and equipping volunteers) and it reduces organisational effectiveness by leaving a small, overworked core of experienced and trained volunteers. This phenomenon of high turnover in the volunteer sector is not restricted to the SES, it is a common problem in most volunteer organisations.

This project, led by Dr Michael Jones at the University of Wollongong, will help volunteer-based organisations better use and manage their resources and volunteer workforce. Findings from this project can be used by organisations across Australia to optimise their workforce and financial strategies to better serve their communities.

For more details on both projects visit [www.bnhcrc.com.au](http://www.bnhcrc.com.au).